Title: Female Avengers in New Avatar: The Face of Feminism in Contemporary Popular Fiction

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Synopsis

A trend seems to be emerging in contemporary popular fiction worldwide: that of engaging with the phenomena ofviolence against women especially in metropolitan centres by focussing on sensational forms of resistance by female figures.This study would explore the mutating nature of the emerging female avenger figure within popular culture in the context of violence against women in a patriarchal setup.The female protagonists are represented as capable of inventing new modes of combating male violence through ingenious means. Their purpose is to avenge the sexual violence perpetrated on women by killing the men responsible for such violence or destroying the power that they possess. I have in mind popular fictions likeStieg Larsson's The Millenium Trilogy consisting of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (published in Swedish as *Men Who Hate Women{*literal translation*}*in 2005 and translated into English in 2008),*The Girl who Played with Fire*(published in Swedish in 2006 and translated into English in 2009.),*The Girl who kicked the Hornet's Nest*(published in Swedish as *The Air Castle That Blew Up* {literal translation}in 2007 and translated into English in 2009)Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (published in three volumes in Japan in 2009–10, translated into English in 2011), and Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire*(2009) and *Mockingjay*(2010).The popularity of these novels is evident from the fact that they have sold millions of copies and that some of them have been adapted into movies by major production houses of Hollywood. The centrality of this popularity rests primarily on the unconventional characteristic charisma of their female protagonists, whom I have termed the female avengers. These are women who surpass their male counterparts in skills and persona and their resistance to prescriptive patriarchal norms render them as non-conformists and necessarily transgressive in nature. Through the act of performing transgression the female protagonists of these texts achieve subjective empowerment that in turn fuels or provokes further acts of transgression against dogmatic normativity.

In recent years the subject of sexual violence on women has entered the public domain of discussion, debate and the need for legal reform and on questions of governance. It could be surmised that the media has played a significant role in reporting escalation of gruesome forms of torture and violence on women, leading to a popular awareness of the issue. I would like to suggest a relation between this public awareness and contemporary popular fictions which I have mentioned.In my dissertation I would like to argue that while these fictions may not necessarily be categorised as 'feminist' in terms of their politics, there is clearly an attempt to engage with and critique patriarchy's expressions of power in forms of sexual violence on women. While the figure of the female avenger perhaps caters to popular fantasies of female empowerment but in

the very process these narratives also interrogate ethics of violence, normative categories of gender and sexuality.This is what I mean by the face of feminism in popular fiction.
While in one hand the novels condemn acts of sexual violence like rape and paedophilia, on the other hand portrays the sexual promiscuity and libidinousness of its female protagonistsas attributes that make them liberal and non-conformists.Collins' hints at forced prostitution serves the purpose of foregrounding the patriarchal structure necessarily undermining and regulating not only female but male sexuality as well.Aomame's preference for balding middle aged men as sexual partners subvert the established norm of sexual desirability of macho men. Lisbeth's assuming of a dominant position in the course of her sexual encounters with Mikael Bloomvistcounteracts notions of machismo. It would be interesting to analyse these gender reconstructions in the context of the popularity of these novels as they simultaneously subvert and recreate new definitions of gender categories and sexual behaviour.

There lies an inherent difference between the conceptual basis of transgression and the actual performance of that transgression-thedifference lies in the manner the transgressive act is performed (both on textual and visual levels). Although the performance of transgression remains consistent, the actual manner in which these acts are performed varies from one another and remains sporadic. The attributes of physical aggression,sexual promiscuity,unconventional dressing and behaviour, body piercing, unorthodox emotional variations ,avenging spirit,use of gore and grotesque may be cited as few examples,which the texts and their cinematic adaptations heavily highlight.It seems that these texts employing this strategy of glorifying the performance of transgression have successfully transformed their female protagonists into figures and icons for popular mass consumption.I would like to suggest that we read this as an attempt to co-opt the radical edge of feminism so that it gradually mutates itself for pandering to popular taste, keeping some of its conceptual formulations.

A tentative chapter division is as follows:
Chapter One: Feminism and Sexual Violence: This chapter will attempt to historicize the feminist concerns with sexual violence on women especially as it pertains to the West. In the late 1960s in the US, the Radical or Second Wave of Feminism had focussed on how women's identities were constituted by the similarity of their oppression in patriarchy; within the varied and complex forms that oppression, sexual violence on women was identified as the most widespread, cutting across race and class. The feminist slogan personal is political attempted to expose and draw attention of women to the covert forms of violence in erotic or libidinal relations.

Chapter Two: Negotiating utopias and dystopias: Interestingly, Collins present a dystopian world which is apparently a kind of sexual utopia. However a close analysis would reveal implicit aspects that point towards sexual and gender inequality- for example the position of authority is always held by a male figure.Stieg Larssson's trilogy like Murakami's *1Q84* presents a largely sexual dystopia where women are raped, tortured and murdered,they are victims of men who often live normalpublic lives but secretly can only be regarded as sadistic,demented and sexually perverted. Such men include billionaires like Martin Vanger or lawyers like Nils Bjurman. Larsson's trilogy is replete with statistics documenting the physical abuse of women in Sweden. The figure of the female avenger emerges in the context of such

sexual dystopias. Although these figures offer resistance, they function within the framework of the social setup, manipulating it to their advantage.

Chapter Three:The figure of the female avenger is not a contemporary invention but belongs to a venerable tradition that includes figures like Progne and Medea. I would like to argue that the female avenger appears in a new avatar in these popular fictions and this emergence has a complex relation to the fantasy of female empowerment in contemporary global context which in turn has been fed by ideas of non-normative gender and sexuality quotients. Irrespective of their physical attributes these bellicose young women are bent on self-assertion as well as assuming the role of apparently feminist avengers. The concept of avenging becomes an important motif in these fictions as the driving force forLisbeth, Aomame, Katniss.Aomame as a secret assassin who butchers abusive husbands evokes a rebelliousstance against the silent suffering of the victimised figure, as does Lisbeth's quest to retaliate against "Men Who Hate Women"(the literal translation of the original title for Larsson's first novel in Swedish). Katniss's non-conformist attitude towards the capitol (a symbol of patriarchy) definitely makes her a champion in the feminist cause.

Chapter Four: Interrogating normative gender and sexualities constructions: Contemporary popular fiction, as Stieg Larsson's trilogy, seems to engage with issues of non-normative gender identities and fluid sexualities, as is evident from Lisbeth's maverickappearance and Aomame's radical sexual behaviour. At a first glance these may seem to be welcome changes. However, it is possible to argue that Larsson's portrayal of graphic sexual scenes in the trilogy as actually instances of misogyny and undermines Lisbeth's stance as a feminist role model.The novels not only engage in subversion of established normative gender roles and sexual behaviour but also reconstruct the domain of male-female romantic bonding along the borders of gender divisions. There seems to be an underlying conviction in these novels that equality involves a tendency towards apparent sexual and gender inversion.

Chapter Five: Intersectionalities with other cultural forms—films, video games, cartoons: The collective analysis of these texts and their visual representation through films would provide an opportunity to extend the field of this investigation. It seems thatMurakami's *1Q84* was written keeping in mind any possible future cinematic adaptations. While Larsson's first novel in the trilogy has already been adapted into a graphic novel, it may be argued that the fictional world of *The Hunger Games*trilogy is modelled on the virtual world of video games. The figure of the female avenger in popular culture has undergone significant change from the 1990s onwards. The emergence and popularity of such individual figures hints at the changing outlook towards the female avenger as a product for mass consumption. Whether this undermines their role as feminist avengers or not remains to be explored.

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